



Deconstructing Social Expectations and Gendered Violence: A Critical Study of Richard Flanagan's The Living Sea of Waking Dreams

First Author:

Nihal Bharti (Research Scholar)

P.G. Department of English

Patna University, Patna

Second Author:

Dr. Sanjay Kumar Sinha (Professor)

Patna College, Patna

Institution: Patna University

Abstract: This paper aims to critically examine the theme of gender-based violence in Richard Flanagan's one of the most fascinating novel *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, published in 2020. In this novel, Flanagan presents objective violence through the character Francie, who experiences the quiet, pervasive harm inflicted by societal expectations and traditional mindsets and Anna, who undergoes objective violence that is closely connected to her individual circumstances, family relationships and surroundings. Objective violence, as theorized by Slavoj Zizek, refers to the systemic and institutional forces that perpetuate harm, often invisibly, through norms and structures. Francie, as an older woman, becomes a victim of societal expectations that push her into self-sacrificing roles shaped by patriarchal traditions. Throughout her life, she has been expected to care for others, often losing her own sense of self in the process. This highlights how women are quietly compelled into lives of submission and service, sacrificing their own needs and desires. As Francie approaches death, her autonomy is stripped away, as her family—especially her

children—make decisions for her, disregarding her own wishes. The societal expectation that women should accept these roles of caregiving, obedience and silence renders Francie powerless, trapped in a system that views her primarily through the lens of duty and obligation. The violence she endures is not very open but structural, stemming from the deeply ingrained norms that dictate women's worth. In contrast, Anna faces objective violence through emotional isolation, intensified by her brother Tommy's passivity and her son's detachment from family responsibilities. These dynamics highlight the pressures modern cultural values place on familial relationships, emphasizing autonomy and control over empathy and connection. Ultimately, this paper argues that Flanagan's portrayal of Anna and Francie's experiences serves as a critical exploration of how objective violence, shaped by societal norms, erodes human bonds and compassion, especially in times of vulnerability by taking references from Flanagan's work *The Living Sea of Waking dreams*.

Keywords: Violence, Expectations, Submission, Autonomy, Vulnerability.

This paper aims to critically examine the theme of gender-based violence in Richard Flanagan's one of the most fascinating novel *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, published in 2020. In this novel, Flanagan presents objective violence through the character of Francie and Anna, who experiences the quiet, pervasive harm inflicted by societal expectations and traditional mindsets. Objective violence, as theorized by Slavoj Zizek, refers to the systemic and institutional forces that perpetuate harm, often invisibly, through norms and structures.

The objective violence faced by Francie, Anna's eighty-seven-year-old mother and family matriarch, is a critical area of discussion. The novel portrays how Francie experiences objective violence in the form of mistreatment from the healthcare system through medical procedures that strip her of her humanity and she was forced to undergo invasive treatments which focused on extending her life without considering her well-being and self-respect. The healthcare providers gradually take away her independence by enforcing treatments and procedures against her wishes—a form of cruelty that subjects Francie to unnecessary agony and distress in their efforts to prolong her life at the insistence of her son Terzo. The physical harm that Francie experiences is made worse by the mental stress caused by her hospital surroundings. The clinical atmosphere of the hospital and the frequent medical interventions rob her of her identity and independence.

The absence of an attitude towards her well-being is troubling since her preferences and comfort seem to take a back seat to the objective of extending her life span – this can make her feel devalued as a person. Francie's ordeal sheds light on the problem of how elderly and terminally ill individuals are often handled within the healthcare sector. The lasting pain she experiences, stems from the beliefs within institutions that see death as a defeat instead of a normal aspect of life. Disregarding Francie's desires and forcing medical procedures on her, represent a type of systemic harm deeply ingrained in modern medicine's practices and morals. Terzo's push for treatments despite Francie's obvious pain brings to light a societal aversion to death and a resistance towards acknowledging the inevitability of passing away. Moreover, the suffering endured by Francie is worsened by the struggles within her family. The different reactions of her children to her situation reveal the conflict between hanging on tight and allowing things to run their course naturally. The ongoing conflicts among her children over the choices about her well-being generate an argumentative atmosphere that reduces her sense of calm and control during her last days of life. This family conflict amplifies her feelings of helplessness and loneliness, showcasing how interpersonal relationships can turn into a form of harm when they do not uphold an individual's freedom and welfare. She finds herself stuck between their opinions and is unable to express her own desires. The family's interactions shaped by grudges and varying beliefs intensify her unease, resulting her final moments being filled with turmoil and emotional distress.

In the broader context of the novel, Francie's journey sheds light on the importance of reevaluating how our society cares for the elderly and those facing terminal illnesses. It highlights the necessity for an empathetic approach centred around individual's needs and self-respect. Flanagan's depiction of Francie's hardship prompts readers to ponder the obligations of healthcare providers and the significance of honouring patient preferences. Her narrative serves as a reminder of the often-invisible forms of violence that exist within institutional structures and personal connections, encouraging a re-evaluation of how society can more effectively respect and uphold the dignity of individuals who are nearing the end of their lives.

The objective violence endured by Anna, a central character in the novel, is another crucial aspect to explore. Flanagan's novel, set against the backdrop of Australia's environmental devastation, captures Anna's existential and moral crises as she navigates a world increasingly marked by ecological degradation and interpersonal alienation. Through Anna's journey, the novel uncovers how objective violence permeates

modern life, subtly shaping individual experiences and eroding both natural and social bonds. Australia's wildfires, which Flanagan describes vividly throughout the novel, become symbolic of humanity's neglect of the natural world. These fires, raging uncontrollably, destroy ecosystems, displace countless animals, and signal the alarming consequences of climate change. For Anna, who lives in the urban setting of Sydney, this environmental violence initially feels distant; it exists as an abstract threat rather than an immediate reality. The city's inhabitants, herself included, are largely disconnected from the land and nature, cushioned from the devastation by layers of technology, wealth and privilege. However, as fires continue to consume vast portions of the country, the violence of climate change becomes unavoidable, infiltrating Anna's life not as an isolated incident but as a prolonged and systematic erosion of the environment. Anna's passivity and initial unwillingness to acknowledge the crisis reflect how objective violence often goes unrecognized, concealed within systems and norms that prioritize economic growth over environmental stewardship. Her relationship with nature becomes emblematic of this disconnection. In her digitally saturated world, Anna finds it easier to scroll through social media feeds than to confront the stark reality of dying ecosystems.

As Anna's journey continues, she becomes increasingly aware of the environmental decay surrounding her, symbolized by her own physical disappearance of body parts. Parts of Anna's body—her fingers, her knees—begin to vanish inexplicably, yet she alone seems to notice these absences. This literal disintegration is a powerful metaphor for the vanishing of nature and the depletion of human empathy and responsibility toward the world. As she loses parts of herself, Anna is forced to confront how humanity, too, is losing essential parts of itself—its connection to the earth, to other species, and ultimately to its own sense of identity and purpose. Flanagan further highlights objective violence through the erosion of human connections in Anna's family. Her relationships with her siblings, particularly Tommy and Terzo, are strained by differing values and beliefs regarding Francie's care. For Anna, Terzo's insistence on this prolonged treatment is difficult to accept, as it contradicts her understanding of her mother's true needs and dignity. Terzo's financial and managerial involvement in his mother's care reflects a transactional approach that inadvertently dehumanizes her by reducing her life to a series of interventions and decisions managed from afar. Terzo's control over the situation—dictated largely by his financial power—creates a form of emotional violence for Anna, who must navigate her own moral convictions within the constraints of her brother's influence. This pressure reflects a broader objective violence that exists in societies where the wealthy often feel entitled to make decisions for others, even loved ones, prioritizing the preservation of life

at any cost rather than honouring the natural process of dying. Terzo's actions suggest a form of coercion through financial power, creating an imbalance in familial dynamics that leaves Anna feeling alienated and morally compromised.

Meanwhile, Anna's brother Tommy adds another dimension to this objective violence. Although Tommy may care deeply for their mother, his sensitivity and emotional paralysis prevent him from effectively supporting her or contributing to crucial decisions. His passivity leaves Anna alone in her struggle to find a balance between respecting her mother's dignity and addressing Terzo's demands for prolonged care. This passive form of objective violence indirectly burdens Anna, as she is left to mediate between her siblings' opposing views while reconciling her own values with the constraints imposed by the situation. Tommy's inability to act forces Anna into a position where she feels responsible not only for her mother's welfare but also for bearing the emotional labour of the entire family. The absence of balanced, supportive family dynamics forces Anna to absorb the impact of her brothers' conflicting behaviours, highlighting the emotional toll of this objective violence on her sense of identity and familial connection.

Anna's son further complicates her experience, embodying the generational indifference and emotional detachment often seen in younger people raised in a digital, individualistic age. His disinterest in family matters and his emotional distance contribute to the objective violence Anna experiences, as he is unwilling or unable to provide the support, she needs in this challenging time. His absence reflects a broader societal trend in which younger generations often feel disconnected from the responsibilities of family, prioritizing their own lives over family expectations. For Anna, this disconnection is painful, as it highlights the erosion of traditional familial bonds and her sense of isolation within her own family. Her son's detachment depicts how modern values, which prioritize independence over familial duty, can subtly inflict emotional harm.

In sum, Anna's experiences with Terzo, Tommy and her son show how objective violence affects family relationships through hidden pressures, financial control, emotional detachment and neglect. Each of these family members reflects a different societal response to suffering and care, rooted in cultural norms that value financial power and independence over genuine compassion and acceptance of mortality. Flanagan's novel reveals how these embedded values shape and strain familial relationships, leaving individuals like Anna feeling trapped between conflicting ideals and responsibilities. This portrayal of objective violence within the family critiques the cultural forces that encourage disconnection and self-interest, highlighting

the need for empathy and shared understanding in the face of life's natural processes, including aging and death. Through Anna's story, Flanagan calls into question societal definitions of love and duty, urging readers to recognize and resist the impersonal forces that erode human bonds.

Conclusion

In *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, Richard Flanagan presents a compelling exploration of the objective violence endured by Anna and her mother Francie, both of whom suffer as they confront societal forces that prioritize power, wealth and control over compassion, dignity and the acceptance of life's natural cycles. For Francie, objective violence is embodied in the medical system's invasive interventions, which strip her of autonomy and dignity by prioritizing life extension at all costs. This institutional and familial insistence on preserving life over respecting Francie's end-of-life choices highlights the ways in which the healthcare system and wealth-driven values can disregard individual well-being. Meanwhile, Anna faces her own struggles which is shown through her tense family relationships and her gradual, symbolic disappearance, reflecting both her inner and outer conflicts. The novel portrays how Anna's brothers, Terzo and Tommy, as well as her emotionally distant son, each contribute to her isolation through differing expressions of societal detachment. Terzo's wealth-driven control over Francie's care and Tommy's emotional passivity force Anna into an untenable position, where she must mediate between conflicting values without a supportive family structure. This situation mirrors broader cultural forces that prioritize financial power, emotional detachment and individualism over interdependence and empathy. Flanagan's novel ultimately critiques the impersonal forces that drive modern society, highlighting how they distort familial bonds, medical ethics, and environmental stewardship. Through Anna and Francie's struggles, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* urges a re-evaluation of societal values, calling for a return to empathy and an acceptance of mortality that respects individual dignity and human connection.

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